

Empathy is the antidote for out-of-control executive egos

by Peter J. Dean

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About 80 percent of the executives whom I know professionally rate their leadership skills as “very good.” After interviewing and obtaining feedback from their subordinates, I’d rate less than 20 percent as belonging in the “very good” category.

Why this disconnect? The perception gap usually is the result of an unhealthy ego — executives’ ego gone awry when they cannot see the true impact of their leadership and the people’s perception of that impact. That unhealthy ego can metastasize into arrogant self-promotion, narcissism, and/or fearful self-preservation.

What is worse is these executives do not know how to break free from this toxic state of mind. They barricade themselves behind a façade of false security and attempt to ensure that their decision-making and actions are not challenged. They rely singularly on their own opinions and experiences. By extending their biases to informal networks of peers, they add very little to their knowledge base since they are attracted to and associate only with like-minded egoistic people. The CEO who says there is no one on his or her board who is not a personal friend — or a friend of another board member — creates a rubber stamp board with no diversity of thought or innovation, showing little progress for the organization. This is a fear-based response of an unhealthy ego and it results in a false sense of competence.

Furthermore, all interactions begin and end with the objective of protecting the unhealthy ego at all costs. This adds even more momentum to the downward spiral from self-conceit to excessive self-centeredness onward to possible unethical behaviors. All along this downward journey, a false sense of security is created. Then what happens?

1. Confidence becomes arrogance.
2. Our way becomes my way.
3. We become Us vs. Them.
4. WIIFM (what’s in it for me?) becomes the work ethic.
5. Loyalty becomes blind.
6. Tolerance becomes indifference.

It is no surprise that this approach fosters indifference, lack of openness and lack of respect as others in the organization begin to emulate bad behaviors. Individuals believe that they can ascend the ladder without having to do the hard work or developing true leadership competencies. These CEOs may find themselves surrounded by sycophantic executives who say what they think he or she wants to hear.

But it doesn’t have to be this way. Executives move toward being exemplary leaders when they become aware that they must curb their own egos. That is the first step in the right direction. The next step is more delicate. The direct approach to adjust an executive’s ego usually is not effective. So, what will work? The answer is teaching executives to pick up on the thinking and feelings of another person and see a situation from the other’s point of view. This is called empathy.

In my research at *The Leader's Edge/Leaders By Design*, as reported in "The Coachable Leader," I have found that adding empathy skills to the executive's leadership repertoire allows the executive's ego to achieve a healthy balance. It is as if the more empathy is increased, the more the unhealthy ego is decreased.

If a leader's ego is balanced with empathy, people will perceive reasonableness and authenticity. The executive is more open to and respectful of other's ideas and input. Others will see this leader as someone who can be trusted and followed. Also, these executives are open to continuous self-development. That is, they are "coachable." This is an upward spiral. Healthy egos guide good and great leaders to show humility, and bring out the best in everyone and release positive energy throughout an organization.

PETER J. DEAN is the founder and president of Leaders By Design, an executive coaching and consulting firm in Bala Cynwyd.

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